

Founders & Foundresses

BY ANNE TSCHANZ

Rev. Damien Marie Saintourens, O.P. —*Ardent Apostle of the Blessed Virgin Mary*



A little known branch of the Dominican family is the congregation known as the Dominican Sisters of the Perpetual Rosary, founded by Rev. Damien Marie Saintourens, O.P., in the late nineteenth century. A devoted son of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Father Damien tirelessly promoted the Rosary to obtain through Our Lady's intercession pardon and mercy for the Church and world. Many cloistered convents in America can trace their roots back to that little shoot grafted onto the Dominican tree in France. While the mission for most became incorporated into the Nuns of the Order of Preachers, many still form a Guard of Honor devoted to the Blessed Mother and her Son.

Father Damien was born Pierre-Auguste Marie Saintourens in Marmande, France, on May 13, 1835. His devout family included a sister and two brothers, one of whom also became a priest. "From the age of nine, I used to say that I desired to be a priest," Damien said, "and the vocation was so rooted in my small head and in my heart that my greatest happiness was to say Holy Mass." Before his First Holy Communion, he mounted a small chair and gave his friends an edifying talk. He didn't recall what he said but he did remember that they didn't laugh!

He described his First Communion in 1845 as "the most beautiful

day of my life." He received Our Lord at an earlier age than usual because it was planned to coincide with the first Mass of his newly-ordained brother. "The first host he gave," said Father Damien, "was to me." Both men were destined to become missionaries. His brother was sent to Hindustan while Damien went west, traveling the length and breadth of North America "to preach especially the rosary and to increase everywhere devotion to the Most Holy Virgin."

His family supported his vocation and, responding to his tearful pleas, permitted him to study at an academy where he could learn Latin. That same year, 1846, on a visit to a Marian shrine, Damien wrote a letter to the Virgin Mary, asking her to watch over his studies. When he entered the minor seminary in 1850, he was forced to leave after a few months due to illness. He then asked her "if she had forgotten my letter!" She hadn't, for he finished his studies in the major seminary a year ahead of schedule. "She always hears our prayers; if it is not one way, it is another."

Working for the Salvation of Souls

In 1860, he was ordained a priest, promising to work at his own sanctification and the salvation of souls. To thank Our Lady, he wished to

propagate devotion to her as well. "If I am a priest, I am what I am through a unique favor of the Most Holy Virgin; I wished to be a missionary of the Most Holy Virgin."

For the next eight years, he was happily involved in parish work—"The service of souls, the sick calls, the Confessions, the spiritual care of children, and the rest." Nevertheless, "I always had in the depths of my heart the thought of the missions." He was accepted in the Foreign Mission Society but was warned: "Do not speak of it to the bishop for that would spoil your future." Honors and brilliant posts were of little import to Father Damien. As long as his heart yearned for the missions, he could never be at peace, but he obeyed his superiors "and for a certain time said no more."

After meeting the Dominican Master General in Rome and making pilgrimages to sites made holy by Saint Dominic and other Dominican saints, he felt a strong attraction to their mission of carrying "the Gospel even to the end of the world." He again asked permission to serve in the missions and again he was denied. But on the Feast of St. Dominic, he resolved to leave the diocese for the Dominicans in a

year if he was still of the same mind. According to Vatican rules, such a request could not be refused.

His patience was rewarded and a year later he was free to enter the Dominicans. "I loved my parish very much," he said. "But my joy in leaving all for God is above any regret; this joy is so great that not a tear has fallen to testify that I regret anything." This was not entirely true, for he could not face his mother, fearing her embrace might weaken his resolve. She wholeheartedly supported his vocation, yet both wept at this move away from his home diocese.

When he finally entered the Dominicans in 1868, however, he felt a joy that he had never experienced before. Taking the name Damien after a Dominican confessor, he slipped easily into religious life. In the novitiate, he wrote, "One forms himself in the virtues of the Apostles... One gives only what one has, and in preaching one inflames others with the love of God insofar as he possesses it himself.... A novice who would like to be a great preacher without being at the same time a great religious would fail completely in his vocation."

His Dominican heart overflowed with joy: "To preach missions



and retreats, to speak to people of redemption, of salvation, of repentance, of hope, of happiness, of eternity: to turn attention of souls to Heaven; what a beautiful life; what happiness to have left all to lead such a life!" He was blessed to be given permission to preach and hear confessions without waiting until solemn vows.

The Perpetual Rosary Introduced

During this time, Damien was introduced to the Perpetual Rosary, developed by an Italian Dominican in the 17th century to combat the moral decay of the times. As it evolved, the idea behind this beautiful devotion was to have a person commit to praying the entire Rosary on a specific day and hour every month. By enrolling enough people, Our Lady would have a Guard of Honor, every hour of every day. After hearing about the Perpetual

Rosary, Damien decided to devote his life to this work, as an offering to Our Lady.

Every preaching mission was an opportunity to inscribe Associates into a round-the-clock schedule. "Before the organization of the Perpetual Rosary, no one rose at night to pray to this good Mother," he wrote while preaching a mission. Now, "a type of monastic order has been established in this city with the mission of rising for Night Prayer."

In 1872, he was made Director of the Perpetual Rosary at Lille. Soon, he had 25,000 Associates, grouped into 15 divisions led by zealous women who along with secretaries and treasurers formed a council. His popularity as a preacher meant that he was often absent from the administrative aspects of this vast Marian army. "Frequently, the idea comes to me of a monastery of Dominican Sisters who would be specially consecrated to the Perpetual Rosary." Angels and saints form a Guard of Honor for the Blessed Mother. "What an honor for the daughters of Saint Dominic to assume the direction and mission of such a Guard of Honor on earth?" They would give Our Lady not just one hour a month but their entire lives.

The Mother Superior of the cloistered Dominican nuns in Mauléon told Damien that she had been praying for some time that the Holy Virgin would raise up someone to begin such a foundation. "I have a sister, Sr. Rose of St. Mary (*see photo above*), who believes herself called by God to a special work." After this news, he spent a cold night of vigil at the Lourdes Grotto where Our Lady had appeared to Saint Bernadette in 1858 praying the Rosary. His sisters believed that he too had a fateful



Rev. Damien Marie Saintourens, O.P.

Born: May 13, 1835, in Marmande, France

Ordination: June 2, 1860 as Diocesan Priest

Entered Dominican Order: October 26, 1868

Solemn Profession: October 26, 1872

Founded the Dominican Sisters of the Perpetual Rosary: May 20, 1880 in Calais, France

Died: September 26, 1920 in Camden, New Jersey

Motto: *Laudare, Benedicere, Predicare* (To Praise, To Bless, To Preach)

Mission: To pray the Rosary continuously before the Blessed Sacrament, bringing the needs of the Church, the Dominican family and the entire world to Jesus through Mary.

encounter that night. “In Heaven alone,” he wrote, “I shall reveal all its secrets.”

His provincial however was opposed to his plans so he submitted in silence. Three years later, a new provincial gave him the go-ahead to found contemplative Third Order Dominican Sisters, much like the Second Order, but with some mitigated observances so they could maintain the Perpetual Rosary round the clock. A Dominican prioress in Calais, France, kindly agreed to form the first postulants.

A cause for alarm arose in 1880 when the French government expelled religious men from their houses. Fearing for the safety of the sisters, Damien moved them to Belgium where now-Mother Rose of St. Mary become the first prioress and co-foundress, amidst great hardship. Vocations flourished but in 1882, Damien received a “terrible blow” when the direction of the sisters was passed to the Belgian Dominicans. It was Holy Thursday. He united his suffering to the Lord’s “so that this work may not suffer by this separation and that it may always prosper.”

His Mission Field Was Everywhere

A popular speaker, in 1886, Father Damien had the joy of being sent to New Orleans, Louisiana, to preach the Lenten services. His limited English was no deterrent as he visited many American cities and enrolled six thousand Associates. Damien believed that no greater mission field existed in the entire world.

In 1888, agreeing to his request, his superiors assigned him to Canada. He undertook an arduous journey across the continent, enrolling thousands of people including Native Americans who mistook the



white-habited friar for the Pope! In 1890, he embarked on an exhausting journey to the West Indies.

Damien never spared himself when it came to serving Our Lord. In imitation of his Holy Founder, Saint Dominic, he slept on a wooden plank and scrupulously obeyed the Rule. Suffering from diseases which made it difficult to be on his feet, he displayed an energy that seemed unbounded.

Only one thing was lacking from Father Damien’s work in America—the presence of the Perpetual Rosary Sisters. “*Deo gratias!*” he wrote when permission was finally granted in 1891. After much searching, the Diocese of Newark became the cradle for the first foundation in the United States. Mother Rose sent four sisters to join two extern sisters whom local communities had generously provided for the work. “Princesses could have arrived from France,” he wrote, “and their coming could not have been more joyously celebrated.”

In a letter to Pope Leo XIII in 1893, Damien told him of the 120,000 Associates and 54 bishops who blessed his work in this mission country. Vocations quickly came, resulting in many new foundations. What joy must have been

in Damien’s heart when in 1917, Our Lady of Fatima declared: “I am the Lady of the Rosary.” He died three years later at the convent in Camden, New Jersey, where he was chaplain for the last years of his life. His body now lies in a nearby Catholic cemetery, where it was interred with the remains of the deceased nuns when the monastery closed in 2013 (*see photo below*).

Today, the Dominican sisters in Milwaukee (DSOPR.org) are the only Perpetual Rosary Sisters in the United States who remain part of the Third Order. However, the Dominican nuns in Marbury, Alabama (StJudeMonastery.org); Summit, New Jersey; West Springfield, Massachusetts (VocationWS.org); Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and Syracuse, New York, still keep the Perpetual Rosary tradition. “It is such an exalted, sweet, and joyful vocation to be Mary’s Guard of Honor,” says Mother Mary Joseph of Marbury. “We thank God and Our Lady for it every day.”

For more information see: The Notebooks of The Reverend Damien Marie Saintourens, O.P., (OPNuns-Lancaster.org). *To become a member of the Perpetual Rosary Association, please visit* SummitDominicans.org.

